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The U.S. sees a drop in illegal border crossings after Mexico increases enforcement



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Migrants cross the Rio Grande into the U.S. from Mexico behind Concertina wire and a sign warning that it's dangerous and illegal to cross, Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2024, in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Associated Press

The Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins and its history



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The U.S. sees a drop in illegal border crossings after Mexico increases enforcement

By **VALERIE GONZALEZ AND ELLIOT SPAGAT**

Associated Press

EAGLE PASS, Texas (AP)

— Daniel Bermudez's family had fled Venezuela and was headed to the U.S. to seek asylum when the freight train they were riding through Mexico was stopped by immigration officials.

His wife tried to explain that her family had permission to go to the U.S. Instead, they flew her to Mexico's southern border as part of a surge of enforcement actions that U.S. officials say have contributed to a sharp drop in illegal border crossings.

In addition to forcing migrants from trains, Mexico also resumed flying and

busing them to the southern part of the country and started flying some home to Venezuela.

Even if temporary, the decrease in illegal crossings is welcome news for the White House. President Joe Biden's administration is locked in talks with Senate negotiators over restricting asylum and \$110 billion in aid for Ukraine and Israel hangs in the balance.

Bermudez said his wife became separated from her family when she talked to authorities as he gathered his stepchild and their belongings. He wanted to run, but his wife said they shouldn't because they had followed procedure by making an appointment with U.S. immigration au-

thorities.

"I told her, 'Don't trust them. Let's go into the brush,'" Bermudez said, adding that other migrants had fled. He recalled her telling him, "Why are they sending us back if we have an appointment?"

Last week, Bermudez, his stepchild and two other relatives were waiting for her at a shelter in the Mexican border town of Piedras Negras as she took a bus back in hopes of still making the date.

Mexico's immigration agency sent at least 22 flights from its border region with the U.S. to southern cities during the last 10 days of December, according to Witness at the Border, an advocacy group that



Texas Department of Public Safety troopers help guide migrants to a processing area after they crossed the Rio Grande from Mexico into the U.S., Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2024, in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Associated Press

tracks flight data. Most were from Piedras Negras, which is across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas.

Mexico also ran two removal flights to Venezuela with 329 migrants. The stretch was punctuated by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Mexico City on Dec. 28 to confront unprecedented crossings to the United States.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said a financial shortfall that had led the immigration agency to suspend deportations and other operations was resolved. He did not offer details.

Arrests for illegal crossings into the U.S. from Mexico fell to about 2,500 on Monday, down from more than 10,000 on several days in December, according to U.S. authorities. In the Border Patrol's busiest area, arrests totaled 13,800 during the seven-day period ending Friday, down 29% from 19,400 two weeks earlier, according to Tucson, Arizona, sector chief John Modlin.

The drop led U.S. Customs and Border Protection to reopen the port of entry in Lukeville, Arizona, on Thursday after a monthlong closure on the most direct route from Phoenix to its nearest beaches. The U.S. also restored operations at Eagle Pass and three other locations.

Merchants in Eagle Pass, a city of about 30,000 people, saw sales take "a ma-

jor hit" while a bridge was closed to vehicle traffic so border agents could be reassigned to help process migrants, Maverick County Judge Ramsey English Cantu said.

"We survive pretty much from everything that comes from the Mexican side," he said.

Last month, CBP resumed freight crossings in Eagle Pass and El Paso, Texas, after a five-day shutdown that U.S. officials said was a response to as many as 1,000 migrants riding atop a single train through Mexico before trying to walk across the border.

In Piedras Negras on Thursday, Casa del Migrante housed about 200 migrants, down from as high as 1,500 recently.

Among them was Manuel Rodriguez, 40, who said his family will miss their appointment to seek asylum that was made through the U.S. government's CBP One app. He said the appointment was registered with his in-laws, who were deported to Venezuela after authorities boarded the bus they were riding.

"It was all under her name and she lost everything," Rodriguez said.

Proposals being discussed by the White House and Senate negotiators include a new expulsion authority that would deny rights to seek asylum if illegal border crossings reach a certain threshold. □

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Defense secretary remains hospitalized as details emerge about delays in notification, even to Biden

By TARA COPP, COLLEEN LONG and KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin remained in the hospital Sunday as more details emerged about key decision-makers, even President Joe Biden, being kept in the dark for days that the Pentagon chief had been in the intensive care unit at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

The Pentagon's failure to disclose Austin's hospitalization reflects a stunning lack of transparency about his illness, how serious it was and when he may be released. Such secrecy, at a time when the United States is juggling myriad national security crises, runs counter to normal practice with the president and other senior U.S. officials and Cabinet members.

A senior defense official said Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks was not notified until Thursday that Austin had been hospitalized since Jan. 1. Once notified, Hicks began preparing statements to send to Congress and made plans to return to Washington, the official said. Hicks was in Puerto Rico on leave



U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin makes a joint statement with Israel Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant, after their meeting about Israel's military operation in Gaza, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Monday, Dec. 18, 2023.

Associated Press

but had communications equipment with her to remain in contact and had already been tasked with some secretary-level duties on Tuesday.

The Pentagon did not say if Hicks was given an explanation on Tuesday for why she was assuming some of Austin's duties, but temporary transfers of authority are not unusual and the official said it is not uncommon for authorities to be transferred without a detailed explanation. Hicks decided not to return after she was informed that Austin would resume full control on Friday. The official was not authorized to pro-

vide details of the transfer of authority and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Biden also was not told of Austin's hospitalization until he was informed on Thursday by his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan. That's according to three people with knowledge of the hospitalization who were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

In a statement issued Saturday evening, Austin took responsibility for the delays in notification.

"I recognize I could have done a better job ensuring the public was appropri-

ately informed. I commit to doing better," said Austin, acknowledging the concerns about transparency. "But this is important to say: this was my medical procedure, and I take full responsibility for my decisions about disclosure."

Austin, 70, remained hospitalized due to complications following a minor elective medical procedure, his press secretary said, as it became increasingly clear how closely the Pentagon held information about his stay at Walter Reed. In his statement, Austin said he is on the mend and is looking forward to returning to the Pentagon soon, but he provided no other details about his ailment.

Sen. Roger Wicker, the top-ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the episode erodes trust in the Biden administration and called on the department to provide lawmakers with a "full accounting of the facts immediately."

"I am glad to hear Secretary Austin is in improved condition and I wish him a speedy recovery. However, the fact remains that the Department of Defense deliberately withheld the Sec-

retary of Defense's medical condition for days. That is unacceptable," Wicker said in a statement.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken voiced support for Austin at a news conference in Qatar on Sunday.

"He is an extraordinary leader in this country, in uniform and now out of uniform. And it's been a highlight of my service to be able to serve alongside him," Blinken said. "And I'm very much looking forward to see him fully recovered and working side by side in the year ahead."

The Pentagon Press Association, which represents journalists who cover the Defense Department, sent a letter of protest on Friday evening, calling the delay in alerting the public "an outrage."

"At a time when there are growing threats to U.S. military service members in the Middle East and the U.S. is playing key national security roles in the wars in Israel and Ukraine, it is particularly critical for the American public to be informed about the health status and decision-making ability of its top defense leader," the PPA said in its letter. □

Congressional leaders announce agreement on topline spending levels, a key step to averting shutdown

By KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders have reached an agreement on topline spending levels for the current fiscal year that could help avoid a partial government shutdown later this month.

The agreement largely hews to spending caps for defense and domestic programs that Congress set as part of a bill to suspend the debt limit until 2025. But it does provide some concessions to House Republicans who viewed the spending restrictions in that agreement as insufficient. In a letter to colleagues, House Speaker Mike John-

son said Sunday it will secure \$16 billion in additional spending cuts from the previous agreement brokered by then-Speaker Kevin McCarthy and President Joe Biden and is about \$30 billion less than what the Senate was considering.

"This represents the most favorable budget agreement Republicans have achieved in over a decade," Johnson writes. Biden said the agreement "moves us one step closer to preventing a needless government shutdown and protecting important national priorities."

"It reflects the funding levels that I negotiated with both parties and signed into law



House Speaker-elect Rep. Mike Johnson, R-La., addresses members of Congress at the Capitol in Washington, Oct. 25, 2023.

Associated Press

last spring. It rejects deep cuts to programs hardworking families count on, and provides a path to passing full-year funding bills that deliver for the American

people and are free of any extreme policies," Biden said in a statement.

The agreement speeds up the roughly \$20 billion in cuts already agreed to for

the Internal Revenue Service and rescinds about \$6 billion in COVID relief funds that had been approved but not yet spent, according to Johnson's letter.

Lawmakers needed an agreement on overall spending levels so that appropriators could write the bills that set line-by-line funding for agencies. Funding is set to lapse Jan. 19 for some agencies and Feb. 2 for others.

The agreement is separate from the negotiations that are taking place to secure additional funding for Israel and Ukraine while also curbing restrictions on asylum claims at the U.S. border. □

Winter storms dump snow on both US coasts as icy roads make for hazardous travel

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — A major winter storm bringing heavy snow and freezing rain to some communities spread across New England on Sunday, sending residents scurrying for their shovels and snowblowers to clear sidewalks and driveways. Winter storm warnings and watches were in effect throughout the Northeast, and icy roads made for hazardous travel as far south as North Carolina.

The Northeast snow came as a Sierra Nevada storm packing heavy snow shut down a stretch of interstate Saturday and briefly knocked out power to tens of thousands in Reno, Nevada.

More than 11,000 electric customers in California were without power Sunday afternoon.

Some communities in Massachusetts had recorded more than a foot (30 centimeters) of snow by Sunday afternoon, according to the National Weather Service. Nearly 13,000 electric customers in the state were without power Sunday afternoon.

Hundreds of flights at Logan International Airport were delayed or canceled Sunday according to tracking website FlightAware.



A car treks down a snow covered road, Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024, in Derry, N.H.

Associated Press

Snow totals were lower for coastal communities, with Boston reporting just a few inches (centimeters). Snow was expected to continue throughout the day.

In Cambridge, where snowfall was lighter, residents quickly ventured out.

"I think it's funny because everyone's been freaking out about it," said Alison Conley, 26, a consultant. "We've been betting as to how much snow we're actually going to have and it's looking like not that much is going to stick."

Conley, who was out walking her dog Sunny, said the possibility that climate change is contributing to relatively warmer winter days in the region — the temperature in Boston is expected to be in the 50s on

Wednesday, melting much of the snow — is a concern. "I think it's super alarming," she said. "It is very weird, but, I don't know, from a selfish side it's like kind of nice to not have snow."

The storm reached into Maine with snow totals of up to 12 inches (30 centimeters) in some places — with locally higher amounts over southern New Hampshire and southwestern Maine. Wind gusts up to 35 mph (56 kph) could add to blowing and drifting snow. Moderate to heavy snow was expected to continue in Vermont, with total snow accumulations of 6 to 12 inches (15 to 30 centimeters).

Major winter storm conditions were expected into Sunday evening, including

snow in parts of New England and rain and freezing rain around the central Appalachian mountains.

New York City mainly saw rain, but counties to the north and west recorded double-digit snow totals by Sunday morning. Millbrook in Dutchess County, about 75 miles (120 kilometers) north of New York, recorded a foot of snow. Port Jervis in Orange County reported 13 inches (33 centimeters).

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said Saturday that she expected two-thirds of her state to get 8 inches (20 centimeters) of snow or more, "fortunately missing some of our more populated areas downstate, the Long Island and New York City."

In the West, a winter storm warning was in effect through Saturday night in the Sierra Nevada from south of Yosemite National Park to north of Reno, where the weather service said as much as 20 inches (50 centimeters) of snow could fall in the mountains around Lake Tahoe with winds gusting up to 100 mph (160 kph).

The California Highway Patrol said numerous spinouts and collisions forced an hourslong closure of Interstate 80 from west of Truck-

ee, California to the state line west of Reno.

In Arizona transportation officials said several highways in the state's northern reaches — including Interstate 40 near Williams and State Route 64 near Grand Canyon National Park — were closed Sunday afternoon due to weather-related crashes and slide-offs from snowfall.

The National Weather Service said Flagstaff was expected to get 4 to 8 inches (10 to 20 centimeters) of snow by Sunday night with Window Rock was forecast to receive 3 to 5 inches (7 to 12 centimeters).

In Nevada, the weather service said the wind chill dropped to 32 degrees at Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas around 7:30 a.m. Sunday. Winds were gusting to 37 mph (60 kph). In northern and western New Mexico, wind chills of 10 to 25 degrees below zero (minus 23 to minus 30 Celsius) were forecast for early Tuesday.

The East Coast system was expected to track along the Northeast coast throughout the weekend.

A foot (30 centimeters) of snow was reported in parts of Monroe County, Pennsylvania, and 11 inches (27 centimeters) in New Jersey's Sussex County. □

A California law banning the carrying of firearms in most public places is blocked again

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A new California law that bans people from carrying firearms in most public places was once again blocked from taking effect Saturday as a court case challenging it continues.

A 9th Circuit Court of Appeals panel dissolved a temporary hold on a lower court injunction blocking the law. The hold was issued by a different 9th Circuit panel and had allowed the law to go into effect Jan. 1. Saturday's decision keeps in place a Dec. 20 ruling by

U.S. District Judge Cormac Carney blocking the law. Carney said that it violates the Second Amendment and that gun rights groups would likely prevail in proving it unconstitutional.

The law, signed by Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, prohibits people from carrying concealed guns in 26 types of places including public parks and playgrounds, churches, banks and zoos. The ban applies regardless of whether a person has a concealed carry permit.



Gun owners fire their pistols at an indoor shooting range during a qualification course to renew their carry concealed handgun permits, July 1, 2022, at the Placer Sporting Club in Roseville, Calif.

Associated Press

Newsom has positioned himself as a leader on gun control and says he will keep pushing for stricter regulations.

Following Saturday's ruling his office issued a statement saying, "this dangerous decision puts the lives of Californians on the line." The president of the California Rifle and Pistol Association, which sued to block the law, countered that "the politicians' play to get around the Second Amendment has been stopped for now." □

North Korea again fires near the sea border with the South, as its leader's sister mocks Seoul

By HYUNG-JIN KIM

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP)

— North Korea again fired artillery shells near its tense sea boundary with the South on Sunday, as the influential sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un mocked the South's ability to detect its weapons launches.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff dismissed Kim Yo Jong's statement as "a comedy-like, vulgar propaganda" meant to undermine the South Korean people's trust in the military and stoke divisions.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff said North Korea fired more than more than 90 rounds near the rivals' disputed western sea boundary on Sunday afternoon. It said South Korea strongly urged North Korea to stop provocative acts immediately. North Korea's military later confirmed it used coastal artillery systems to carry out live-firing exercises. It said the drills were part of its military training schedules and the direction of its shells



This photo provided by the North Korean government, Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, delivers a speech during a national meeting against the coronavirus, in Pyongyang, North Korea on Aug. 10, 2022.

Associated Press

fired didn't expose any threat to South Korea.

On Friday, North Korea launched about 200 shells. South Korea also claimed that the North fired more than 60 rounds on Saturday, but its rival has denied that.

Kim Yo Jong said that North Korea on Saturday only detonated blasting powder simulating the sound of its coastal artillery on the seashore, to test the South Korean military's detection capabilities.

"The result was clear as we expected. They misjudged the blasting sound as the sound of gunfire and conjectured it as a provocation. And they even made a false and impudent statement that the shells dropped north" of the sea boundary, Kim Yo Jong said in a statement carried by state media.

"I cannot but say that (South Korean) people are very pitiful as they entrust security to such blind persons and offer huge taxes

to them," she said. "It is better 10 times to entrust security to a dog with a developed sense of hearing and smell."

Animosities between the two Koreas are running high because North Korea has conducted a barrage of missile tests since 2022 while South Korea has expanded its military training with the United States in a tit-for-tat cycle.

North Korea's artillery firings Friday prompted South Korea to have its troops on border islands fire artillery rounds near the sea boundary in response. The shells launched by the two Koreas fell at a maritime buffer zone they had established under a 2018 military agreement on lowering front-line military tensions.

The agreement requires the Koreas to halt live-fire exercises, aerial surveillance and other hostile acts along their border, but the deal is now in danger of collapsing because the two Koreas have taken measures breaching it.

Experts say North Korea is likely to ramp up weapons tests and escalate its trademark fiery rhetoric against its rivals ahead of South Korea's parliamentary elections in April and the U.S. presidential elections in November. They say Kim Jong Un likely thinks a bolstered weapons arsenal would allow him to wrest greater U.S. concessions if former President Donald Trump returns to the White House.

In her statement Sunday, Kim Yo Jong called South Korea's military "gangsters" and "clowns in military uniforms." She also suggested South Korea's possible future miscalculation of North Korean moves could cause an accidental clash between the rivals, jeopardizing the safety of Seoul, a city of 10 million people which is only an hour's drive from the land border.

On Tuesday, Kim Yo Jong issued a statement calling South Korean conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol "foolishly brave" but his liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in "very smart." □

China sanctions 5 U.S. defense companies in response to US sanctions and arms sales to Taiwan

By KEN MORITSUGU

Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China announced sanctions Sunday on five American defense-related companies in response to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and U.S. sanctions on Chinese companies and individuals.

The sanctions will freeze any property the companies have in China and prohibit organizations and individuals in China from doing business with them, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement posted online. It was unclear what impact, if any, the sanctions would have on the companies, BAE Systems Land and Armaments, Alliant Techsystems Operations, AeroVironment, Viasat and Data Link Solutions. Such sanctions are often mostly symbolic as American de-

fense contractors generally don't sell to China.

The Foreign Ministry said the U.S. moves harmed China's sovereignty and security interests, undermined peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and violated the rights and interests of Chinese companies and individuals.

"The Chinese government remains unwavering in our resolve to safeguard national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity and protect the lawful rights and interests of Chinese companies and citizens," the ministry statement said.

The announcement was made less than a week ahead of a presidential election in Taiwan that is being contested in large part over how the government should manage its relationship with China, which



A man walks past a screen in the BAE Systems chalet at the Farnborough Airshow in Farnborough, England, on July 16, 2018.

Associated Press

claims the self-governing island as its territory and says it must come under its rule. The Chinese Foreign Ministry did not specify which arms deal or which U.S. sanctions China was responding to, though spokesperson

Wang Wenbin had warned three weeks ago that China would take countermeasures following the U.S. government's approval of a \$300 million military package for Taiwan in December.

The deal includes equipment, training and equipment repair to maintain Taiwan's command, control and military communications capabilities.

The U.S. said the sale would support the modernization of Taiwan's armed forces and the maintenance of a credible defense. "The proposed sale will improve the recipient's capability to meet current and future threats by enhancing operational readiness," a news release from the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency said. Taiwan is a major flashpoint in U.S.-China relations that analysts worry could explode into military conflict between the two powers. China says that U.S. arms sales to Taiwan are interference in its domestic affairs. □

Air attack in northwestern Myanmar kills 17, including children, but military denies responsibility

By **GRANT PECK**
Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Airstrikes by Myanmar's military on a village under the control of the pro-democracy resistance in the country's northwest have killed at least 17 civilians, including nine children, local residents and a human rights group said Sunday. The morning aerial attacks on Kanan village in Sagaing region's Khampat town, just south of the Indian border, also wounded about 20 people, they said. Myanmar is wracked by violence that began after the army ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021. After peaceful demonstrations were put down with lethal force, many opponents of military rule took up arms, and large parts of the country are now embroiled in conflict. The country's independent online media and the BBC's Myanmar-language service reported the air attack Sunday, but the military government denied responsibility, claiming that it was false news spread by Khit Thit Media, an in-



The bodies of the victims killed by airstrikes are shrouded in blankets at a building in Kanan village, Khampat town in Sagaing region on Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024.

Associated Press

dependent online news service sympathetic to the anti-military resistance. The report by the state-run MRTV television in its Sunday night news broadcast cited an unnamed official from the area as saying there had been no plane flying in the area on Sunday morning. The military government in the past two years has stepped up airstrikes against two enemies: the armed pro-democracy Peoples Defense Force, and ethnic minority guerrilla groups that have been

fighting for greater autonomy for decades. The two groups sometimes carry out joint operations against the army. In response to accusations of abuses, the military government often accuses pro-democracy forces in the area of carrying out violent campaigns of terror. But analysts for the United Nations and non-governmental organizations have gathered credible evidence of large-scale human rights abuses by the army, including the burning of entire villages and displacement of close

to 2 million people that has triggered a humanitarian crisis. Sagaing region, near the border with India, has been a stronghold of armed resistance to the army. A district capital and two small towns, including Khampat, have been seized in the past few months by a coalition of resistance forces and the Kachin Independence Army, one of the stronger ethnic rebel groups. A local resident who helped carry out rescue work told The Associated Press on Sunday that a jet fighter dropped three bombs on the village of Kanan, on the outskirts of Khampat, about 280 kilometers (170 miles) northwest of Mandalay, the country's second-biggest city, killing 17 civilians who were in buildings near the village school. Most of the residents in Khampat town are from the Chin ethnic minority, the vast majority of whom are Christians, generally Baptist. Myanmar is largely Buddhist, led by the Burman majority. The ruling military identifies with a nationalistic strain of Buddhism that shows hostility to

non-Burman and non-Buddhist populations, found mostly in the border areas where much of the current fighting takes place. About 10 houses near the school were destroyed by bombs, said the resident who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was afraid of being arrested by the military. He provided a possible explanation for the attack, noting that a ceremony had been scheduled for Sunday to mark the completion of combat training for new members of the resistance forces at another school in the village, and that might have been the intended target of the attack. He added that the bombing might have been the consequence of a tip-off by a military informer. Another resident, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity due to security concerns, said nine of the dead were children and 20 other people were injured. He also provided AP with photos of the aftermath of the attack, including dead and wounded people and damaged buildings. □

Lebanon airport screens display anti-Hezbollah message after being hacked

Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The information display screens at Beirut's international airport were hacked by domestic anti-Hezbollah groups Sunday, as clashes between the Lebanese militant group and the Israeli military continue to intensify along the border. Departure and arrival information was replaced by a message accusing the Hezbollah group of putting Lebanon at risk of an all-out war with Israel. The screens displayed a message with logos from a hardline Christian group dubbed Soldiers of God, which has garnered attention over the past year for its campaigns against the LGBTQ+ community in Leb-

anon, and a little-known group that calls itself The One Who Spoke. In a video statement, the Christian group denied its involvement, while the other group shared photos of the screens on its social media channels. "Hassan Nasrallah, you will no longer have supporters if you curse Lebanon with a war for which you will bear responsibility and consequences," the message read, echoing similar sentiments to critics over the years who have accused Hezbollah of smuggling weapons and munitions through the tiny Mediterranean country's only civilian airport. Hezbollah has been striking Israeli military bases and



Planes are grounded due to the coronavirus pandemic at the Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut, Lebanon, on March 19, 2020.

Associated Press

positions near the country's northern border with Lebanon since Oct. 8, the day after the Hamas-Israel war in Gaza began. Israel has been striking Hezbollah positions in return.

The near-daily clashes have intensified sharply over the past week, after an apparent Israeli strike in a southern Beirut suburb killed top Hamas official and commander Saleh Arouri.

In a speech on Saturday, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in a speech vowed that the group would retaliate. He dismissed criticisms that the group is looking for a full-scale war with Israel, but said if Israel launches one, Hezbollah is ready for a war "without limits." Hezbollah announced an "initial response" to Arouri's killing on Saturday, launching a volley of 62 rockets toward an Israeli air surveillance base on Mount Meron. The Lebanese government and international community have been scrambling to prevent a war in Lebanon, which they fear would spark a regional spillover. □

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The Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins and its history

(Oranjestad)—The **Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins** is one of the most visited places by tourists on the island, as it lies along the northern coast line near the mini pool and on the way to the Natural Bridge. Despite its seemingly plain appearance, this ruin represents one of the most important histories of the island: The Aruban Gold Rush.

Built in 1872 by English company Aruba Island Gold Mining Company Ltd, the gold mill at Bushiribana was constructed in the area where most gold was found by locals. The story

of gold on Aruba actually dates back to 1725, when a first exploration for gold on the island was commissioned by the Dutch West India Company. Under the leadership of Mr. Paulus Printz, a three-year search was conducted on Aruba, to no avail. Though they found some gold, it was enough to motivate a further search, and the assignment was discontinued by Printz himself.

It wasn't until 100 years later, in 1824, when a young boy found a lump of gold while out herding his father's sheep. His father took

it to a local merchant who then sold the lump for \$70. Unbeknownst to the boy and his father, they quite literally struck gold, and as word got out, a gold fever spread among the locals who started searching for more gold. About 25 pounds worth was found.

At the same time, the Aruban government took immediate actions, and informed Curacao that gold was found. At first, everyone could look for gold, as long as they sold it to the government. However, after some time, the government decided to im-



plement stricter rules and banned local search parties.

Over the years, concession-holding had seen different companies from around the world, all of which used primitive methods to dig and carve out gold from the rocks. Aruba Island Gold Mining Company Ltd. was no different, but used a unique method that in-

involved grinding the rocks and letting the dust be blown away by the strong northeast wind, leaving clumps of gold behind. The next step was melting the gold and letting it attach to quicksilver in order to obtain pure gold. All these processes were done at the Bushiribana Gold Mill.

The gold mill itself had a short life-span: only 10 years in service, but its structure remained relatively solid till this day, and is now a historical remnant.

Sources: Etnia Nativa & goldmineranch.com.

Rhythms Circus Company Aruba: putting Aruba's name on the world stage

Rhythms Circus Company Aruba is a talented group of young people working daily to present their art in the form of acrobatics, dancing, acting and singing. After an impactful participation in one of America's biggest talent shows, they are now bringing their amazing talent to Aruba!

In a show full of light, music, and with performances to famous musical figures like Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson and Tina Turner, the group consisting of 15 people from various countries delights the audience with their artistic prowess at the Paseo Herencia Mall, every Wednesday and Friday starting at 7pm. Each day has a different show, so you can attend both nights for the complete experience!

RCCA also offers the possibility for you and your family to enjoy dinner before the show! Starting from 6pm, you and your family



can delight from the wide-ranging menu that includes a variation of delicious main course meals complete with a delectable flan dessert as a sweet treat. Enjoy your dinner even more at a VIP table complete with comfort seating!

The group, under the leadership of directors and creators Diego Jaramillo and Yamila Hernandez are opening the doors to the ballroom to our local audience as well as our visitors so that everyone can have

the privilege of experiencing this wonderful show.

Hernandez explained that the idea for this project started in 2010 when she came to work in Aruba. After being on the island for a while she decided to stay and live here, and she met Diego Jaramillo, who is currently her partner. Together they came with the idea to establish a company together with other professional artists, with the goal of living from their art.

Hernandez says that the work is hard – all of the performers are professional artists, and while the production of the show is not a challenge for them, selling the idea proved difficult since at the time, there weren't any shows of its kind on the island.

America's Got Talent Currently they are offering a show with music, choreography and at the end, they have a shocking acrobatics ending, one that was seen by thousands of people around the world when the group travelled to Los Angeles in the United States to represent Aruba in America's Got Talent. Hernandez said that the show was very important for them to meet the public present because people could experience this performance live and right before their eyes.

Their presentation in America's Got Talent "was in-

credible" and they were able to meet the jury and many other artists staying there for three months. But the exhaustion and physical toll was so great that Diego suffered an accident, and because of this, they had to cancel all future commitments.

Reservations and tickets To make a reservation to see this incredible display of creativity and acrobatics, scan the QR code which will take you directly to their website for a booking. To find more information about RCCA, please visit their Instagram page @rccaruba.



Casa del Mar Beach Resort Aruba Announces Exclusive Offer: Multiple Consecutive Weeks of Ownership at a 20% Discount!

Oranjestad, Aruba – Casa del Mar, the premier name in vacation ownership, is thrilled to announce an offer that will redefine the way you experience vacations. Now, you can secure multiple consecutive weeks of ownership in the same suite at Casa del Mar with an exclusive 20% discount! This extraordinary opportunity allows you to indulge in extended, unforgettable getaways while enjoying all the benefits of ownership at Casa del Mar without having to change rooms during your stay!

Casa del Mar is renowned for its commitment to providing “home away from home” vacation experiences, and this latest offer is no exception. Here are just a few of the exceptional benefits you’ll enjoy when you become an owner at Casa del Mar:

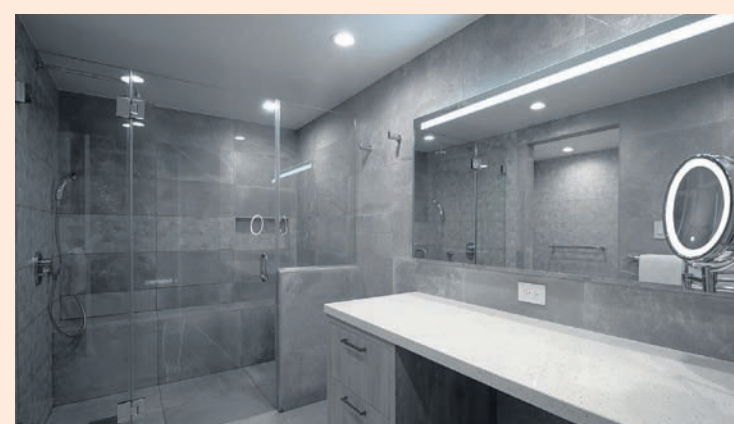
1. Discounts on Multiple Weeks Bundle: With this new offer, Casa del Mar extends its commitment to



delivering value to its new owners. By securing multiple consecutive weeks, you’ll not only enjoy the convenience of extended stays without the hassle of changing rooms, but also benefit from an exclusive 20% discount on the listing prices, making your dream vacations more affordable than ever.

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Casa del Mar.”

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Ayo & Casibari: Aruba's famous rock formations

(Oranjestad)—The Ayo and Casibari Rock Formations are known locally as one of the crucial sites to have in your "off-road" trip itinerary. These naturally formed rock formations as just one of the few places on the island that hold a rich history of our culture and of our ancestors.

Ayo
The Ayo Rock Formation is located in the northern part of the island, right on

the road that leads you to the Black Stone Beach, and close to the Natural Bridge. The Ayo is a fenced terrain that consists of several giant boulders, resting neatly on top of or side by side each other, adding gorgeous natural architecture to the surrounding "mondi"*. This is also one of the few sites to contain prehistoric markings of our indigenous ancestors. The Ayo Rock formation contains stairs that lead you

to the top of the highest boulder, offering a breathtaking view of the Aruban backyard. The Ayo is usually quiet, as it is situated farther away from the busier parts of the island. However, this is just another charm of the site: the quiet area and the refreshing breeze offer a sense of comfort and peace.

Casibari
Probably the busier rock formation site, the Casibari is situated more in the center of the island, much closer—and more accessible—to the general public. Just like Ayo, Casibari is a fenced area containing several boulders that lay on top or lean on each other. The best aspect of the Casibari Rock Forma-

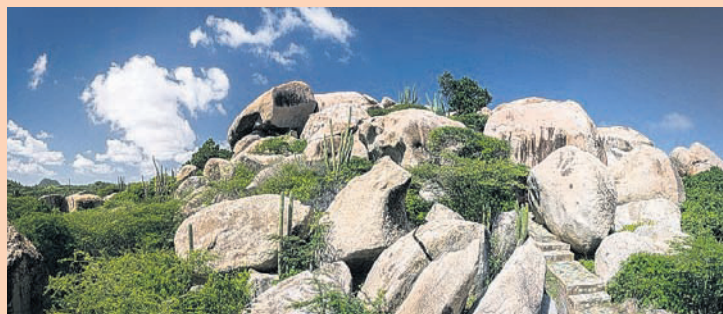


tion is the accompanying view when you climb up the top of the round, flat bolder. For this position, you can see the majority of the island and the ocean in the south. Right in front of the entrance, there is the Casibari Café and Grill, a great place to get refreshments and snack before continuing your off-road adventure!

Both sites are open free to the public, 24 hours a day. However, unless you are

taking a trip with a professional tour guide, there are no guides at the sites to help you climb the rock. So, do be careful when trudging on the boulders, and make sure to befriend any roaming goats you see along the way!

*Mondi: what we call our Aruban wilderness. We don't have forests, or deserts, but we do have mondi!



Aruba to me

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Last but not least: check out



our website, Instagram and Facebook page! Thank you for supporting our free newspaper, we strive to make you a happy reader every day again.

For today we received a lovely message from Karen and Donald Feldman from Lynnfield, Massachusetts; Craig Feldman from Manhattan; Tracy, Doug, Holden and Tenley Campbell from Manhattan; and Julia Frank from Montreal, Canada.

They wrote to us saying: "Aruba to me is our home away from home. We love being greeted at the Costa

Linda with hugs and a sincere, welcome home. Our beautiful vacation in beautiful Aruba is almost over, but in 11 months we will return to our happy place. And once again we will stroll Eagle Beach, watch the most beautiful sunsets, and be together in paradise.

Those who question if paradise exists have never been to Aruba."

Thank you for sending us this wonderful message sharing what Aruba means to you with us and our readers!

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Visit the island's popular cave sites!

(Oranjestad)—Among the endless sea of dark brown sand and cacti, there are two caves hidden in the outskirts of San Nicolas, in the north-eastern area of the island. These caves, The Quadirikiri cave and The Fontein Cave are open to visitors of the Arikok National Park, so if you ever decide to take an “off-road” tour in the park, be sure to visit these prehistoric caves...and be sure to bring a flashlight!

Quadirikiri Cave

Known for its two chambers accompanied by a skylight, the Quadirikiri Cave is the most popular cave among locals and tourists, as it is easy to walk through and provides great lighting for pictures.

As with all prehistoric or ancient sites, there is always a folk legend that adds to the lore and mystery of the site. The Quadirikiri cave is no different. The most well-known legend behind the cave could be considered as Aruba's first love story, as it tells the tale of the undying love between the chief's daughter and her beloved. As legend



would have it, the chief disapproved of his daughter's choice of lover, as he thought him unworthy. Stubborn and filled with anger, the daughter refused to turn away her beloved.

So, the chief decided to lock her up in the Quadirikiri Cave, in hopes that she would soon calm down and turn away her lover. Her beloved, in turn, was locked away in the Tunnel of Love (Now known as the Huliba Cave).

Through the pathways underneath the Tunnel of Love running up to the Quadirikiri cave, the two love birds found each other, and refused to let each other go. Because of their

stubbornness, they both died in the Quadirikiri Cave, their ascending spirits burning two holes in the ceiling of the cave. This is why the cave has two holes through which sunlight passes through to illuminate the chamber.

Though there have been discoveries of Amerindian drawing on the wall, these have mostly been ruined by vandalism. However, the Fontein Cave further up north, provides a better glimpse in prehistoric Amerindian paintings.

Fontein Cave

Longer than the Quadirikiri Cave, the Fontein Cave contains pathways that stretch to the limestone walls further down. Here is also where prehistoric drawings can be seen. Though this cave does not have its own legend, this was speculated to have been occupied—or at least used by prehistoric Arawak settlers on the island for rituals and other spiritual ceremonies.

The Huliba Cave/ Tunnel of



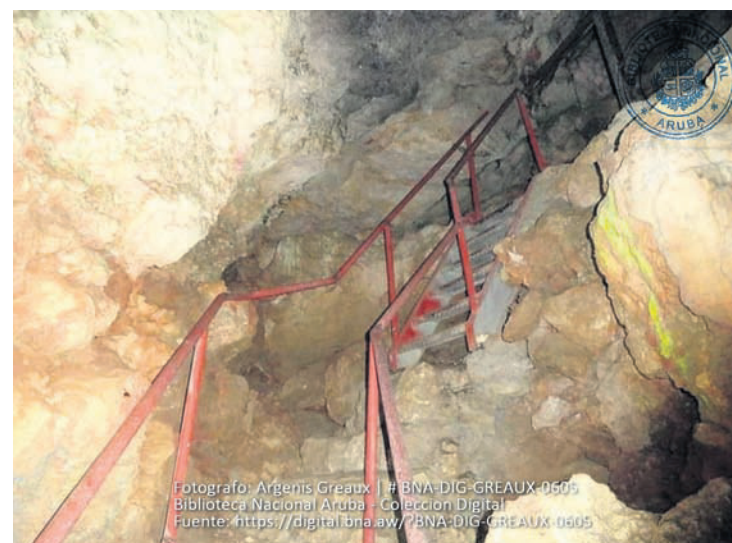
Love

The Huliba Cave, formerly known as the Tunnel of Love, was once open to the public, and was the biggest and most accessible of all three caves. This cave had five chambers, including one that is heart-shaped. This cave had narrow stairs that led to long pathways deep into the cave, with a staircase leading to the exit on the other side. In one of the chambers, there used to be the carving of the Virgin Mary, put there for the protection of the cave.

However, the Huliba Cave has been permanently closed for a few years now,

as a way to preserve the bat population that lives in the cave. These Long Tongue Fruit Bats and Insect Eater Bats are very important to the ecosystem of the island. Though this cave is no longer accessible to the public, it surely is interesting to learn more about the history of these caves and the Awarak tribes that resided or utilized them.

Do note that these caves are very dark, humid, hot, and are inhabited by bats. Do wear comfortable clothing and shoes, as the pathways in these caves may be rough and bumpy, and don't forget to bring a flashlight!



Did you know about...

Basic driving rules on Aruba (part 1)

(Oranjestad)—Have you ever felt confused when you're driving on the highways or backstreets of Aruba? Then we present a simple guide to some of the basic rules of Aruban traffic, along with some tips for things to look out for.

Speed limit

Legally, the speed limit on the four-lane highways is 80 km/h. This speed limit also counts for the main roads that are connected to the highways. The minimum speed is 50 km/h. Most people drive around 60 km/h on the main roads and about 70 km/h on the highways. There are also areas that indicate a speed limit on a sign; these are usually around populated and school areas.

The four-lane highways contain the left-lane, also known as the "fast" lane for each direction. Here is where vehicles can drive up to the maximum speed. However, legally it is not permitted to drive for long periods of time on the left lane. This lane is primarily designed for drivers to switch lanes before a roundabout, for example, if your exit on the roundabout is on your far left. The general lane to drive in—both at maximum and minimum speed—is on the right lane.

Roundabouts

Speaking of roundabouts, it is important to know where you have to enter and drive on the roundabout to make your exit. A good rule of thumb is to count the exits starting from your right side. So, exit 1 would be on your right; exit 2 would be straight ahead; exit 3 would be on your far left and exit 4 would lead to the road paralleled to the one you're on, heading in the other direction.

Most roundabouts have these 4 exits, so they are relatively simple. When you're driving on the four-lane highway, it is important to know when to switch to the left lane to make your exit: if your exit is on your far left (exit 3), then



you need to switch to the left lane on the highway before nearing the roundabout so you can take the path that leads you directly to your exit. If your exit is on your right or if you're going straight ahead, you can keep driving in the right lane of the highway.

It's also important to know that vehicles about to enter the roundabout must yield to those already on it. A good rule of thumb is to look out if someone is coming from your left side.

However, other roundabouts can be quite tricky to navigate...

Watty Vos Boulevard (the "paperclip" roundabout)

Probably the biggest roundabout on the island, the "paperclip" roundabout on the Watty Vos Boulevard is one of the trickier roundabouts that could—and has—caused confusion among both tourists and locals. However, once you take a good look at it, it's fairly simple. The

basis is just the same as a regular roundabout (left exit? left lane! etc.), but instead of having four different exits like on a regular roundabout, now you have two extra; one on the right and the other on the left side of the roundabout. The rules don't change at all, you just have to keep an extra eye open.

Airport roundabout

Ah, yes. The infamous airport roundabout. The favorite roundabout amongst local, because of its easy (hard) lanes that never (always) cause confusion among drivers. Sarcasm aside, this roundabout can be tricky to enter, especially when you're driving from the direction of the airport heading. When you're driving away from the airport reaching the roundabout, you'll be faced with three lanes. The far right lane is to take the exit 1 out heading east (right lane of highway). The middle exit is used for exit 1 (left lane of highway), 2 and 3. The far left exit is used to only exit on exit 3 (left lane of highway) and 4.

"Las Americas" roundabout

The Las Americas roundabout is located near the Talk of the Town hotel, west from the airport roundabout. This roundabout may look like a regular roundabout—and for the most part, it is. However, when you are driving from the east going in the direction of town, please take note that there are two exits on your right.

When you're driving towards this roundabout, you'll notice that the road becomes wider, splitting into two lanes. The right lane is used to take the first and second exit on the right. If you want to exit straight ahead, you must drive on the left lane!

It's always scary to drive in new places where the traffic may look and work differently, but once you get it right once, you'll get the hang of it in no time. Additionally, all roundabouts and roads on Aruba have signs and arrows painted on the road to help guide you. So take your time, keep your eyes open and don't forget to wear a seat belt!



Two companies will attempt the first US moon landings since the Apollo missions a half-century ago

By **MARCIA DUNN**
AP Aerospace Writer
CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP)

— China and India scored moon landings, while Russia, Japan and Israel ended up in the lunar trash heap. Now two private companies are hustling to get the U.S. back in the game, more than five decades after the Apollo program ended.

It's part of a NASA-supported effort to kick-start commercial moon deliveries, as the space agency focuses on getting astronauts back there.

"They're scouts going to the moon ahead of us," said NASA Administrator Bill Nelson.

Pittsburgh's Astrobotic Technology is up first with a planned liftoff of a lander Monday aboard a brand new rocket, United Launch Alliance's Vulcan. Houston's Intuitive Machines aims to launch a lander in mid-February, hopping a flight with SpaceX.

Then there's Japan, which will attempt to land in two weeks. The Japanese Space Agency's lander with two toy-size rovers had a big head start, sharing a September launch with an X-ray telescope that stayed behind in orbit around Earth.

If successful, Japan will become the fifth country to pull off a lunar landing. Russia and the U.S. did it repeatedly in the 1960s and 70s. China has landed three times in the past decade — including on the moon's far side — and is returning to the far side later this year to bring back lunar samples. And just last summer, India did it. Only the U.S. has put astronauts on the moon.

Landing without wrecking is no easy feat. There's hardly any atmosphere to slow spacecraft, and parachutes obviously won't work. That means a lander must descend using thrusters, while navigating past treacherous cliffs and craters.

A Japanese millionaire's company, ispace, saw its lander smash into the moon



This photo provided by Astrobotic Technology shows the Peregrine lunar lander at the company's facility in Pittsburgh in October 2023.

Associated Press

last April, followed by Russia's crash landing in August. India triumphed a few days later near the south polar region; it was the country's second try after crashing in 2019. An Israeli nonprofit also slammed into the moon in 2019.

The United States has not attempted a moon landing since Apollo 17's Gene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt, the last of 12 moonwalkers, explored the gray, dusty surface in December 1972. Mars beckoned and the moon receded in NASA's rearview mirror, as the space race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union came to a close. The U.S. followed with a handful or two of lunar satellites, but no controlled landers — until now.

Not only are Astrobotic and Intuitive Machines looking to end America's moon-landing drought, they're vying for bragging rights as the first private entity to land — gently — on the moon.

Despite its later start, Intuitive Machines has a faster, more direct shot and should land within a week of liftoff. It will take Astrobotic two weeks just to get to the moon and another

month in lunar orbit, before a landing is attempted on Feb. 23.

If there are rocket delays, which already have stalled both missions, either company could wind up there first.

"It's going to be a wild, wild ride," promised Astrobotic's chief executive John Thornton.

His counterpart at Intuitive Machines, Steve Altemus, said the space race is "more about the geopolitics, where China is going, where the rest of the world's going." That said, "We sure would like to be first."

The two companies have been nose to nose since receiving nearly \$80 million each in 2019 under a NASA program to develop lunar delivery services. Fourteen companies are now under contract by NASA.

Astrobotic's four-legged,

6-foot-tall (1.9-meter-tall) lander, named Peregrine after the fastest bird, a falcon, will carry 20 research packages to the moon for seven countries, including five for NASA and a shoe-box-sized rover for Carnegie Mellon University. Peregrine will aim for the mid-latitudes' Sinus Viscositatis, or Bay of Stickiness, named after the long-ago silica magma that formed the nearby Gruithuisen Domes. Intuitive Machines' six-legged, 14-foot-tall (4-meter-tall) lander, Nova-C, will target the moon's south polar region, also carrying five experiments for NASA that will last about two weeks. The company is targeting 80 degrees south latitude for touchdown. That would be well within Antarctica on Earth, Altemus noted, and 10 degrees closer to the pole than India landed last summer.

Scientists believe the south pole's permanently shadowed craters hold billions of pounds (kilograms) of frozen water that could be used for drinking and making rocket fuel. That's why the first moonwalkers in NASA's Artemis program — named after Apollo's twin sister in Greek mythology — will land there. NASA still has 2025 on the books for that launch, but the General Accountability Office suspects it will be closer to 2027.

Astrobotic will head to the south pole on its second flight, carrying NASA's water-seeking Viper rover. And Intuitive Machines will return there on its second mission, delivering an ice drill for NASA.

Landing near the moon's south pole is particularly dicey.

"It's so rocky and craggy and full of craters at the south pole and mountainous, that it's very difficult to find a lighted region to touch down safely," Altemus said. "So you've got to be able to finesse that and just set it down right in the right spot."

While Houston has long been associated with space, Pittsburgh is a newcomer. To commemorate the Steel City, Astrobotic's lander will carry a Kennywood amusement park token, the winner of a public vote that beat out the Steelers' Terrible Towel waved at football games, dirt from Moon Township's Moon Park, and a Heinz pickle pin.

The lander is also carrying the ashes or DNA from 70 people, including "Star Trek" creator Gene Roddenberry and science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. Another 265 people will be represented on the rocket's upper stage, which will circle the sun once separated from the lander. They include three original "Star Trek" cast members, as well as strands of hair from three U.S. presidents: George Washington, Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. □

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24/7

A group representing TikTok, Meta and X sues Ohio over new law limiting kids' use of social media

By JULIE CARR SMYTH

Associated Press

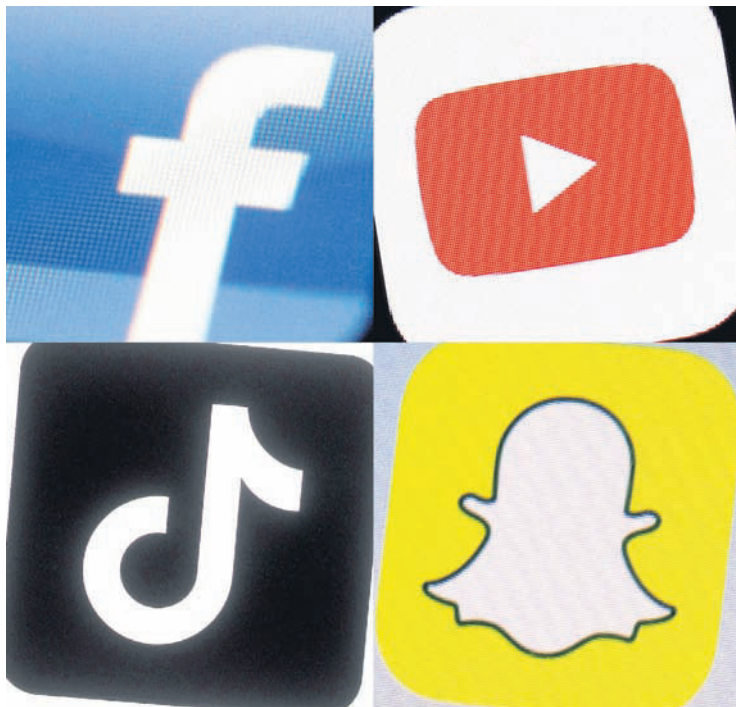
COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — A trade group representing TikTok, Snapchat, Meta and other major tech companies sued Ohio on Friday over a pending law that requires children to get parental consent to use social media apps.

The law was part of an \$86.1 billion state budget bill that Republican Gov. Mike DeWine signed into law in July. It's set to take effect Jan. 15. The administration pushed the measure as a way to protect children's mental health, with Republican Lt. Gov. Jon Husted saying at the time that social media was "intentionally addictive" and harmful to kids.

The NetChoice trade group filed its lawsuit against GOP Attorney General Dave Yost in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Ohio. It seeks to block the law from taking effect.

The litigation argues that Ohio's law — which requires social media companies to obtain a parent's permission for children under 16 to sign up for social media and gaming apps — unconstitutionally impedes free speech and is overbroad and vague.

The law also requires social media companies to provide parents with their privacy guidelines, so that families can know what



This combination of 2017-2022 photos shows the logos of Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat on mobile devices.

Associated Press

content will be censored or moderated on their child's profile.

"We at NetChoice believe families equipped with educational resources are capable of determining the best approach to online services and privacy protections for themselves," Chris Marchese, director of the organization's litigation center, said in a statement. "With NetChoice v. Yost, we will fight to ensure all Ohioans can embrace digital tools without their privacy, security and rights being thwarted."

The group has won lawsuits in

California and Arkansas. Husted, who leads Ohio's technology initiatives and championed the law, called Friday's lawsuit "cowardly but not unex-

pected."

"In filing this lawsuit, these companies are determined to go around parents to expose children to harmful content and addict them to their platforms," Husted said in a statement.

He alleged the companies know their algorithms are harming children "with catastrophic health and mental health outcomes." □



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No. 1 Michigan vs. No. 2 Washington for CFP title caps season of realignment

By RALPH D. RUSSO

AP College Football Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — Michigan vs. Washington is just about the perfect way to end the 2023 college football season, a matchup of unbeaten teams that hits all the major themes and storylines of the past five months from conference realignment to the transfer portal — with Jim Harbaugh as the main character.

Harbaugh's top-ranked Wolverines (14-0) face Michael Penix Jr. and the second-ranked Huskies (14-0) on Monday night at NRG Stadium in the last national title game before the College Football Playoff expands from four teams to 12.

"We're going to have to play really good. And I think our team is ready," Harbaugh said Sunday during a news conference with Washington coach Kalen DeBoer in which he compared his team to a pack of wolves and — yet again — ducked questions about his future. "Still the hay is not in the barn. It never is for us. Still polishing. Still working. But super excited, super excited to watch our players go out there and compete tomorrow night."

Michigan's regular season started and ended with Harbaugh serving three-game suspensions related to NCAA infractions cases. The latter was handed down by the Big Ten in November as punishment for an in-person scouting and sign-stealing scheme the conference determined broke its sportsmanship policy.

The scandal dominated headlines just as Michigan was entering the meat of its Big Ten schedule. The accusations against Harbaugh's program led many to question the legitimacy of the Wolverines' renaissance over the past three seasons. This is Michigan's third straight playoff appearance, but first time advancing after beating Alabama in overtime in the Rose Bowl.



Washington head coach Kalen DeBoer, left, and Michigan head coach Jim Harbaugh pose with the trophy after a news conference ahead of the national championship NCAA College Football Playoff game between Washington and Michigan Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024, in Houston.

Associated Press

Being doubted only galvanized a team loaded with experience that came into the season unafraid to point to winning Michigan's first national championship since 1997 as the goal.

"A lot of guys came back just for this moment," said linebacker Michael Barrett, one of nine Michigan starters in their fifth or sixth years. Washington is built similarly and led by the type of star who typifies college football's new era of player empowerment.

Penix is a Florida native who started his career at Indiana — he already has a win against Michigan on his resume — but transferred to Washington to play for DeBoer in 2022.

Finally healthy after four injury-ravaged seasons in the Big Ten, Penix has become a star in the Pacific Northwest. The runner-up for the Heisman Trophy had some voters questioning their decision last week when he threw for 430 yards in a Sugar Bowl victory against Texas.

"Man, it's a dream come true. To be honest, I'm still wrapping my head around

it," Penix said.

Penix decided to run it back for 2023 in December 2022 and a bunch of talented teammates followed, such as All-America receiver Rome Odunze, and defensive end Bralen Trice and offensive tackle Troy Fautanu, both third-team All-Americans.

"He kind of led the charge. And a lot of guys chose to go down the same road," DeBoer said Sunday. "I think they just really firmly believe that there was more left out there for this football team."

It helps these days that college players can make some extra money off their fame and be compensated for name, image and likeness. NIL collectives for both schools concentrated efforts on retaining their established players.

The combination of NIL money and loosening transfer rules seemed to tip the balance of power in college football this season. After years of the same small group of teams locking down the majority of playoff spots, and Southeastern Conference teams

or Clemson winning eight straight titles, the top tier of contenders grew — but too soon for the CFP to accommodate all the deserving teams.

The four-team playoff will go out like it came in, with a Big Ten vs. Pac-12 championship as Washington plays the final Pac-12 football game for the conference as it is currently structured. During the three weeks leading into the 2023 season, the Pac-12 was plundered by its Power Five competitors. Ironically, the conference then went on to have its most entertaining and competitive season in years, with the Huskies snapping a six-year Pac-12 playoff drought.

The Huskies will try to win the Pac-12's first national title in football since Southern California in 2004, a parting gift of sorts for the league it helped found in 1915. Washington's last national championship came in 1991.

The Huskies will join the new coast-to-coast Big Ten this summer, and in nine months will welcome Michigan to Seattle for a confer-

ence game.

Whether Harbaugh will still be the Michigan coach by then remains to be seen. The presumption and speculation has been that for the third straight year, he will draw interest from NFL teams. Harbaugh spent four years with the San Francisco 49ers, leading them to a Super Bowl against his brother John's Baltimore Ravens, before returning to his alma mater in 2015.

It took a while, but the 60-year-old Harbaugh has delivered on the high expectations he brought to Ann Arbor. And despite the tumult off the field, Michigan would like to keep him around.

The uncertainty about Harbaugh, especially with even more NCAA-related penalties possibly looming for him and Michigan, has given this Wolverines' season a last-dance vibe.

"Everything is right here in front of us, coming down the straightaway, like a thoroughbred," Harbaugh said. "You can see the finish line. Got the blinders on. Each guy, I'm just going to the whip." □

Rafael Nadal withdrew from the Australian Open with a hip muscle injury

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP)

— Rafael Nadal's comeback from hip surgery is on hold after he withdrew from the Australian Open with an injury a week before the start of the season's first Grand Slam tournament. The 22-time major champion said Sunday on social media that medical tests he took in Melbourne revealed a small tear in a hip muscle and he would fly home to Spain for treatment.

The 37-year-old Nadal has won the Australian Open twice — in 2009 and 2022 — and his absence will leave this year's event without what had been expected to be one of its main story lines. It was a year ago at Melbourne Park that Nadal hurt his hip flexor during a second-round loss to Mackie McDonald, then missed the rest of the season.

Nadal had an operation in June and his return to the tour after nearly 12 months away came last week in Brisbane. After winning two matches, the left-hander took a medical timeout during the third set of a quarterfinal loss to Jordan Thompson on Friday.

"Hi all, during my last match in Brisbane I had a small problem on a muscle that as you know made me worried," Nadal wrote Sunday. "Once I got to Melbourne I have had the chance to make an MRI and I have micro tear on a muscle, not in the same part where I had the injury and that's good news. Right now I am not ready to compete at the maximum level."

The former No. 1-ranked player's career has been marked by a series of injuries, including to his knees, left foot and left wrist, perhaps connected to his punishing style of play.

"A lot of things can be happening in a body like my body after a year without playing tennis," he said.

The loss to Thompson was Nadal's third match in four nights and lasted nearly 3 1/2 hours, following straight-set victories over Dominic Thiem and Jason Kubler.



Rafael Nadal of Spain reacts after missing a shot in his quarter-final match against Jordan Thompson of Australia during the Brisbane International tennis tournament in Brisbane, Australia, Friday, Jan. 5, 2024.

Associated Press

Since arriving in Australia to begin the season, Nadal sounded like someone lowering expectations for what

he might achieve during the tour's swing through the country. He made clear that his focus was to

be fit for the clay-court season and the French Open, which begins in May and where he has won a record

14 championships.

"I have worked very hard during the year for this comeback and as I always mentioned my goal is to be at my best level in 3 months," he wrote Sunday. "I really wanted to play here in Australia and I have had the chance to play a few matches that made me very happy and positive," Nadal said.

The Australian Open begins on Jan. 14 — the first time it is starting on a Sunday, instead of a Monday — and, according to FanDuel Sportsbook, top-ranked Novak Djokovic is favored to add to his record totals of 24 Grand Slam trophies and 10 titles at Melbourne Park. □



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Culinary Voyage

Start your gastronomic journey with a scrumptious appetizer such as the Maryland Crab Cakes, maybe the Crispy

Calamari or the mouthwatering creamy Garlic Tarragon Shrimp. You can also opt for a classic French Onion Soup, a Lobster Bisque or the famously Water's Edge House Wedge, a crisp wedge of fresh romaine lettuce topped with homemade blue cheese dressing, diced tomatoes, chopped bacon, caramelized pecans and blue cheese crumbles, drizzled with balsamic reduction. This followed by the Chef's special of seafood such as Fresh salmon filet seasoned and grilled, topped with lemon cilantro butter and served with homemade mashed potatoes and fresh asparagus, a nice plate of Ahi Tuna or a succulent pasta dish like the Florentina Fettuccine Alfredo. Meat Lovers will have their fix with choices of a devourable 22oz. Bone-In "Tomahawk" Rib-Eye, pan seared in garlic infused oil and finished in the oven or our juicy N.Y Strip Loin, seasoned & grilled. All our steaks options are seasoned with a blend of kosher salt and freshly cracked black pepper. Served with homemade mashed potatoes, seasoned vegetables and a choice of red wine reduction, green peppercorn demi glace, mushroom sauce, or bacon blue cheese butter. For extra sides the options are delectable. Fresh asparagus, seasonal vegetables, mashed or baked potatoes, fries or rice and beans. Combine your personal choice with one of the most exclusive wine from the great selection of international wines to compliment your dish. Kids will enjoy every item of the specially compiled kids menu and there are also optional dishes for all vegans, vegetarians and gluten-free guests. To end the culinary voyage with some luscious sweetness, the desserts are wild. From a piece of coconut flan, NY cheese cake, carrot cake, chocolate brownie or our classic Tiramisu with kahlua and amaretto served with choco-



late sauce and coffee jelly. Not to mention the fresh and light piece of key lime pie.

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If you are planning a birthday dinner, here you will receive a nice bottle of champagne to take home with you to extend your experience even further whether on the beach or your own private balcony.

Live entertainment

Just about every day of the week, there is a different live entertainment by the best local artists for you to enjoy. Whether you're in a romantic mood, or more in a swinging mood, there is absolutely a night especially for you where you can combine great music with delicious cocktails mixed with concoctions. In addition, Water's Edge offers three daily Happy Hours from 12pm-1pm, 4pm-6pm and again from 9pm-10pm with all premium brands specially priced.

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Whether you join us for breakfast, lunch or dinner, Water's Edge Restaurant & Bar offers a relaxed and inspirational dining experience overlooking the beautiful Eagle Beach with spectacular ocean views. Gather with friends and family for drinks and appetizers or a night of pampering and relaxation.

Thank you to all our guests

From the bottom of our hearts, we would like to Thank all of our guests who showed us so much love and support all throughout the year, and hopefully will continue to do so in the years to come. What we are most grateful for is that we could get back to doing what we love, which is looking after our guests. So, thank you for every dinner, lunch, breakfast, every to-go order, every glass of wine, every birthday, anniversary and date-night that you spent with us this last year. To our new guests, Welcome! We hope you to see you back soon! ☐



"Water's Edge Restaurant is where magnificent beach views, amazing food and excellent service come together."

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For more information about the menus, entertainment and hours, please visit the website **watersedge-aruba.com**

